

# BLACK FRIARS

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OVER THE WALL OF PARTITION	The Editor .....	257
NICOLAS BERDYAEV: 1874-1948	Eugenie Lampert .....	263
NICOLAS BERDYAEV AND THE RUSSIAN IDEA	Charles Vereker .....	268
MEDIEVAL VALUES	Jean Leclercq, G. D. Schlegel	273
THE MIND OF MIDDLE AGE	Ralph Velarde .....	283
OBITER	Aldate .....	288
REVIEWS: Terence Netherway, O.P.; H. van Straelen, S.V.D.; Illtud Evans, O.P.; Edward Quinn; M. Shirley; Victor White, O.P.; D. Douie, etc. ....		291

### OVER THE WALL OF PARTITION

**M**ODERN technique has involved as never before the whole of mankind in the vicissitudes and joys of individual races and peoples. Hitherto troubles could occur in Rome without affecting Peking and a revolution in Manila would hardly be felt in Mosul. But those days have passed. Italian elections, Palestinian panics and Russian purges are the concern of the whole world. At the moment the conflicts of men seem to be the portion shared by all; but as the world is involved in this common suffering it is time that it should also begin to share the joys, the cultures, the philosophies of its individual races. It matters now more than ever before what lies at the back of men's minds in Bagdad, Berlin and Buenos Aires; and the wall that has divided, in particular, the East from the West must be broken down in order to help lighten this present universal burden.

In recent years many wall-breakers have risen up to reveal the East to the West (those who reveal anything but the commercialism of the West to the East are, we believe, far fewer); and among these in their own spheres Nicholas Berdyaev and Ananda Coomaraswamy were perhaps the greatest. They are both dead, and it is urgent that their works be continued and their names honoured in order to bring understanding in the present confusion and to carry men's minds over the wall of partition whither men's bodies and their economies have long preceded them. An important volume of essays was in fact collected to honour the seventieth birthday of the great Indian

philosopher. On that day, however—22nd August, 1947—the book was still in proof and when it eventually appeared Dr Coomaraswamy was already dead. The forty learned and elegant essays, therefore, stand as a memorial to the man to whom it had fallen more than any other to interpret Indian art and philosophy to the West.<sup>1</sup> The contributors are well aware of his position in this respect and it is only to be regretted that his own clear scholastic mind was not spared to interpret their essays; for the majority of the writers are, as we should expect, experts on Indian, or in general Eastern, art and thought, but their very scholarship often demands the interpreter.

Coomaraswamy was more intelligible to the West than Berdyaev, because he had adopted, rather than challenged, the manner of thought of the West while yet his heart remained always constant to *Nirvana*—indeed when death came he was on the point of retiring to some monastery in India to complete his detachment from time. It was fitting that his last book, which he characteristically directed to be sent for comment to BLACKFRIARS and which has only recently appeared, should be concerned with this point of time's relationship with eternity.<sup>2</sup> The choice of such a subject for study at the end of his life betrays at once the personal and speculative aims of the author. He is not writing as a philosopher interested in a purely speculative problem but as facing the final problem of life which he hopes to break open with the perennial philosophy common to East and to West and to all men, to crack the shell of transient being and taste of the yolk of true reality. 'It is *from* the relative truth of name-and-form that the Comprehensor is liberated', he quotes from an Upanisad; and it was for this liberation he was preparing at the end of his days. At the same time he was seeking a liberation from the opposition of religions, cultures and philosophies, a breaking down of the wall of partition. He begins with a quotation from Aristotle; his exposition is saturated in Augustine, Thomas and Eckkhart as well as Philo and Hindu and Buddhist literature. In the first chapter he quotes: 'But the Comprehensor of That (Time without parts) in which time itself is cooked (matures), *he* knows the Vedas!'—a verse from the Maitri Upanisad; and in the last it is Herrick who has this honour:

And there mine eyes shall see  
All times, how they  
Are lost i' th' Sea  
Of Vast Eternitie.

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<sup>1</sup> *Art and Thought*. A volume in honour of the late Dr Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. Edited by K. Bharatha Iyer (Luzac; £3.3.0).

<sup>2</sup> *Time and Eternity*, by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (Artibus Asiae Publishers, Switzerland; \$4.80 or 20 S. frs.).

He seeks to know the passage of time in the timeless moment; and the Sufi, the Buddha, the Christian philosopher, Aristotle and Christ himself, all seem to hold the same key which will open the door from time into eternity. When he wrote in more sociological terms, as for example in one of his last essays, 'Art, Man and Manufacture', in *Our Emergent Civilisation* (Harper; U.S.A.), it was his theory of beauty which was the key to life and living. He writes indeed as 'the greatest authority on Indian art' with the clarity of Eric Gill, so that Gill himself could write of his friend Coomaraswamy 'that no other living writer has written the truth in matters of art and life and religion and piety with such wisdom and understanding' (cf. *Art and Thought*, pp. xvi and 87).

It is perhaps in beauty more than in truth that Dr Coomaraswamy felt his solution, his mediation, approaching. He has the mind of a philosopher but the poet's taste for the concrete Being. With understanding he quotes St Thomas concerning the last instant of a previous time being the first instant of the subsequent time, but he thinks it could be 'more clearly expressed' in terms of the circle and its ray. He is, in fact, really interested not in Einsteinian dialectic on relative measurements but in the eternity of God and the instantaneity of conversion, with free will which can make things and with the unsuccessive *tota simul* source of the thingness of all things. His strength lies in this real, concrete approach to the foundations of reality; and his familiarity with the words and ideas of several cultures and philosophies would seem to open a way to communicating this strength to others. No wonder the editor of *Art and Thought* looked to him as the head of an intellectual elite which would unite to re-condition devastated mankind; and he goes on to say: 'Dr Coomaraswamy's call to the service of Perennial Philosophy has gained many adherents. Some, at least, among the intellectuals of the world are gradually but surely becoming aware of how much his labours mean for mankind . . . men like Coomaraswamy "throw the shadow of eternity into their own day".' (p. xv).

Here we must pause to consider this claim that a poet-philosopher should be the modern saviour. There are other Indian writers who have sought this elixir in the *philosophia perennis*, in 'the deepest wisdom of the ages'. Thus Professor Sir S. Radhakrishnan, in his *Religion and Society*<sup>3</sup>, looks to this basic element in religion to rid the world of the materialism which is immersing man in mere time. But for him the religious, spiritualising impulse rises up in man irrespective of its particular outward form, and as a rule it is hindered and made complex by rite and dogma. For Professor Radhakrishnan

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<sup>3</sup> Published last year by Allen and Unwin; 10s. net.

'religion is rooted in a sense of the wonderfulness and eternal mystery of life itself, its grace and power, a feeling of rapture when we reach the satisfying object; and without these man is as good as dead' (p. 45). With such a subjective view of reality there is no need to break down any walls; each can sit behind his own barrier practising the asceticism proper to his locality and so discover the truth within him. He can encourage others to do the same by shouting over the wall to his neighbours, but it will not matter much if he slings over some unmerited abuse too—as Sir S. Radhakrishnan does at Christianity—for we need to assist each religion to discard its cumbersome dogmas so that its faithful may find their rapture. Each religion should seek its own spiritual leader who will lead his people away from the materialism of time, but there can hardly be a single '*nunc stans*' to which all should draw near.

This subjective, modernist view of reality explains the interest shown in individual religions rather than in a true *philosophia perennis*, still less in a true religion. A competent volume of essays on '*The Great Religions of the Modern World*'<sup>4</sup> was published recently in which various scholars described objectively 'the genius, development and spiritual core' of contemporary religions, as 'a study of religion in its relation to the world crisis'. The volume might be said again to interpret the East to the West, since the latter is represented by two essays, Catholicism and Protestantism as opposed to Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Islam, Judaism and Eastern Orthodoxy on the other side. But the main significance of this work lies in its underlying idea: not that there is one universal and saving philosophy behind all livable systems of thought, but that all these represent a way of salvation. It is more scholarly than to give the 'take your choice' impression which the Third Programme series on the same theme has given to some listeners; and several of the authors point out that only the introduction or the greater development of some general Christian principle will enable men of these Eastern religions 'to share in a larger-world activity'. Nevertheless religion is regarded as a species divided into a whole row of distinct individuals each sharing the same nature.

Now which of these two attitudes to life, being and eternity will help us to find a peaceful spiritual basis for a world-wide order? On the one hand there is the attitude adopted by Professor Radhakrishnan that all the different religions must become purer in their own right and learn to live in harmony with others, rather as we might imagine Anglicans, Wesleyans, Catholics, Baptists and Jews to be living in friendship in England. This might be considered as piercing windows in the wall of partition in order to peer at those on the other

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<sup>4</sup> Edited by Edward J. Jurgi (Princeton and Cumberlege; 21s.).

side.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand there is Dr Coomaraswamy (and Berdyaev too) who would help us through the wall by finding the one universal key to reality. We have to confess that neither of these attitudes can take us very far in bringing spirit in line with the present world-wide intercommunication of matter; for they are both based on a false or limited conception of religion. It has been said that 'religion' was never studied as a distinct subject until the seventeenth century, and that false abstraction has eventually made it possible for the editor of *Art and Thought* to write: 'The reader will come across so many startling corroborations drawn from Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Jain and Islamic sources that he will soon have ceased to regard these nomenclatures as anything but complementary and vitally inter-related ones. In fact the reader who had regarded himself as specifically Hindu or Christian, Asiatic or European, will soon begin to wonder how much of him is also of the other and the labels themselves will acquire a new value for him in proportion as he is reborn into this understanding'. (p. xiii).

The perennial philosophy, of course, must contain the natural elements of religion, the worship of the Absolute, the creaturely act of acceptance of the Creator. And to that extent subjectively there may be discovered a host of parallels and similarities between these various forms of worship. But in order to jump clear of the wall we must look at the one object which all should be approaching, and in which Dr Coomaraswamy was seeking liberation for himself and others. It must be that he and his admirers, many of whom have written in this volume of essays, can lead us to the threshold. Absolutely speaking philosophy and natural religion have the power to touch the hem of the Lord's garment; and Dr Coomaraswamy in *Time and Eternity* points the way to a resolution of the natural mystery of divine omnipotence and human free will. But to find the inner living heart of the Eternal One something more is necessary, a supernatural way of entry. This supernatural way of its nature must be unique and it is the claim of Christianity to have been entrusted with this way. If this is true then there is the one religion properly so-called and all the others are natural likenesses or similitudes (cf. St Thomas on whether the name 'God' can be used for any but the true God, I, 13. 9).

In that they are seeking the one single object, it is here that the would-be intermediaries fail. The most eminent of the contributors to *Art and Thought*, Dr C. G. Jung, writing of the psychology of Eastern Meditation, regards the end of this process to be the same in Christian and Buddhist thought, only 'there exists an immense

<sup>5</sup> Radhakrishnan himself honours Dr Coomaraswamy with an article in *Art and Thought*. He however puts forward the same fundamental claims as in his book.

difference between the two formulations'. There is no doubt at all about the tremendous importance of Dr Jung's discoveries in what must be the well-spring of natural religion, but not even he or Coomaraswamy can break down the wall between the natural and the supernatural. There is only one approach to that wall which will reveal the secret door through which we can cross over. 'And no man hath ascended into heaven but he that descended from heaven'. The trajectory is a descent from the supernatural into the natural, for there is only one object and he is a supernatural object.

The other approach must be fundamentally subjective, analysing man's religious instincts. It will reveal amazing parallels between Christianity, Hinduism, Islam; and the student of all these forms may be drawn to embrace the Christian religion because he finds therein the most comprehensive exercise of all these elements. Or he may decide to stress certain elements in his Buddhism which he finds more developed in Christianity. But all this activity is carried on behind walls and is in reality not different in kind from the religious exercises of a Radhakrishnan.

But granted the objectivity of the Christian revelation, all these studies and discoveries contain a tremendous illumination. They show that the religion of God, the religion of Christ, coming down from the Father, has an echo in every breast. The unique and undivided, changeless will of the Father has created the whole world round his Son incarnate and round the cross. Consequently it is not surprising if we find that the 'collective unconscious' contains in its depths all the symbolism of Christ and his redemption; it is not surprising that 'The Way' of Buddhism, interestingly outlined by Miss I. B. Horner in this volume, is a way through water, as the Christian Way leads us through Baptism; it is not surprising that the 'Waking Dream', which Mircea Eliade describes as a technique for curing certain neuropaths, is one of climbing a staircase, the Scale of Perfection ('It is useful to retrace in ancient religions the same symbols of ascension to heaven by means of stairs'); it is not surprising that a number of these writers look back with a certain wistfulness to the European middle ages as a period when this religion of '*philosophia perennis*' was to be found flourishing with a certain wholeness and spontaneity, apparently lacking in these other religions.<sup>6</sup>

To the Christian coming down from above with Christ all these

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<sup>6</sup> Meyer Schapiro writes 'On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art', and claims that medieval churches disclose a taste for ornament which can hardly be classed as 'functional'. It would be interesting to know what Coomaraswamy made of this contribution. He, with Gill, upheld the functionalism idea, but it was far from being a purely utilitarian concept and embraced all 'rational' ornament.

studies, particularly of men like Coomaraswamy and Jung, are of the utmost importance. These men have come as near as may be to integrating the subjective and objective realisation of man in his approach to God. But it requires the breath of life, the supernatural view which reveals the meaning of all these manifestations, revealed all *in Verbo*. Art is fundamentally religious; all religions bear the traces of Christianity; so all art and thought must be viewed from the standpoint of the *anima naturaliter christiana*. God has made and is making all things *in Verbo*, a Word who is made flesh and dies for man's redemption.

In other words the christian holds the key; he alone can pass through the wall of partition. It is, therefore, his most urgent and pressing responsibility to make his own the works of these men. If he hears an echo of Christ's voice in Hinduism or Buddhism, in Al-Ghazali or in the natural quest of man for Unity, he must reply in the voice of Christ with such intensity that eventually the echo and the voice may be joined in one sound. That Coomaraswamy did so much more than any contemporary Christian to discover the identity of sounds is a serious rebuke to Christians, but now they alone can take up his work and bring it successfully to the beginning of a conclusion.

But now in Christ Jesus you who sometime were afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one and breaking down the middle wall of partition, the enmities in his flesh: making void the law of commandments contained in decrees: that he might make the two in himself into one new man, making peace, and might reconcile both to God in one body by the cross, killing the enmities in himself.—Ephesians 2, 13-6.

THE EDITOR.

## NICOLAS BERDYAEV: 1874-1948

**M**ARCH 23RD of this year marked the death of Nicolas Berdyaev, one of the most remarkable men and thinkers of our age. It is necessary that I should remind the readers of BLACK-FRIARS of a few essential dates and events in his life. Born in 1874, he was thus just of the age to live on the marches of two worlds, at a time of some of the greatest upheavals in history, and he aptly describes his path as lying 'between revolutions'. His entire thought was indeed pervaded by an awareness of the catastrophic destruction of an old world and of the emergence—for better or for worse—of a new one upon its ashes. This was no mere allergy to new twentieth-century topics; no mere groping around in the ruins of a desolated world in search of new assured and unquestioned values: he opened